



Panel report: Connection to the Grid Distributive Justice and Energy Wealth

Zurich, June 6, 2019, 5th Swiss Congress of Historical Sciences

Organizers: Monika Gisler / Felix Frey

Participants: Paul Josephson / Felix Frey / Melsted Odinn

Commentary: Monika Gisler

Report by Oleksandra Kunovska Mondoux, University of Fribourg

The geographical possession of natural resources does not necessarily result in wealth for the country, as the examples of Niger's oil or Angola's diamonds best prove. How do geopolitical, economic and social obstacles hamper access to the even distribution of energy? The organizers of this panel looked at *energy justice* applied by K. Jenkins and other proponents of this concept, from a historical standpoint. The main purpose was to analyse energy from physical as well as human values perspectives.

PAUL JOSEPHSON (Waterville, USA), in his paper presented by Felix Frey, set out to compare the similarities and benefits in access to electricity for the masses during the times of Stalin and Roosevelt. Energy justice as an ideological utopia before the Cold War reveals the competition between socialist and capitalist systems. During the 1930s, several projects were launched by Franklin Roosevelt in The New Deal, to attract unemployed Americans to construction of electricity supply infrastructure in the poorest residential areas. In 1933, the Tennessee Valley Authority, the TVA, was established in a region seriously affected by the Great Depression, to overcome poverty. The TVA, which was seen in D. Lilienthal's memoirs as "Democracy on the March", promoted the ideas of progress and prosperity to farmers in its educational programs. The paradox is that while Roosevelt



was aiming to revolutionize everyday life with micro services (such as the electric shaver or refrigerator), in the USSR industrialisation and collectivisation seemed to serve the power of the state more than people starving in the Ukraine or Kazakhstan. Lenin's plan GOELRO for the electrification of Russia as a key element of the communist future was continued by Stalin's extensive irrigation constructions. A number of Soviet projects, such as DniproHES (Ukraine), were attractive to the people, but in fact electricity was hardly expanded into rural areas. To conclude, Roosevelt and Stalin promoted the advantages of their respective systems, trying to convince farmers in Nebraska or in the Ukraine of the equal benefits of energy distribution, but this was not a panacea for all problems, at least in the Soviet Union.

Then, **ODINN MELSTED** (Innsbruck) presented his research on the role of district heating utilities in everyday life, which in contrast to other forms of energy utilities like electricity, water or gas are still little analysed by scholars. How can the concept of distributive justice, in contrast to a system-building approach, be applied to Iceland? In Reykjavik, the transition from individual coal heating to communal district heating aimed to reduce pollution and become a reliable energy source in the residential area during the 1930s-1970s. The generation and transmission of heating is differentiated into individual heating of ovens, water based central heating and district heating. In 1930-1945, the construction of geothermal district heating in Reykjavik was a costly megaproject largely promoted in advertising campaigns, which proclaimed it would free all consumers from dirty and expensive coal fuel. However, after the Second World War, it created distribution injustices, firstly in the city's suburbs and then in the seven municipalities of the Capital Area not included in the initial project. It was not an easy task from the utility and city government's perspectives to justify disparities for people obliged to pay a higher price for oil-fired heating imported from the Soviet Union in the context of the oil prices' crisis, which were finally removed by 1979. In fact, energy distribution is a complex issue within the concept of justice, as by eliminating some disparities other forms of injustice are created.

A paper presented by **FELIX FREY** (Berne) concerned recent political reconfigurations of power after the annexation of Crimea, which he takes as a case study to assess the concept of energy justice. From a historical perspective, energy justice is an analytical term, while for political scientists, it is rather a normative guide that includes three components – distributional, procedural and recognition justice. The Ukrainian energy system, mainly built during Soviet times, over the years kept close ties with Russian neighbouring regions. In 1962, the first connections from Crimea to the



Ukrainian mainland enabled electricity to flow without interruption until 2014, when the peninsula was annexed by the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, Ukraine continued to supply the peninsula, according to the European Energy Charter of 1991. In November 2015, the construction of an energy bridge was launched to integrate the Crimea and the city of Sevastopol to Russian energy supplies and to decrease Crimea's dependence on the Ukraine. Since Ukraine and Russia have failed to renew the agreements because of annexation, Ukrainian grid companies, such as UkrEnergo, have radically decreased energy supply to the peninsula even though this contradicts their own interests. An energy bridge from Russia was suitably justified by the fact that the Kyiv government objected to restoring the supply to Crimea for about a month. Paradoxically, the Russian energy supply released the Ukraine from expenses related to Crimea. Finally, recent events around Crimea show that historical dimensions should be taken into account, while the concept of energy justice, as a normative approach, cannot always be applied effectively to the past.

MONIKA GISLER (Zurich) commented on the papers presented by inviting thoughts about the distribution of global energy in the past as well as reflections on its prospects for the future. The notion of energy justice is based on a philosophical concept of social and environmental justice. How can a normative approach, as used by F. Frey, explain the benefits for consumption and production? In the case of Crimea, which is a geopolitical incident region of political interest: How does energy justice distribution affect people? In O. Melsted's paper, a distribution of clean energy in contrast to a dirty and expensive fuel is an excellent illustration of the search for justice. P. Josephson's paper, by focusing on how the USSR's and US's projects aimed to transform the masses by electrification, examines little the people's perspective. While all three papers demonstrate a state or city standpoint, what would be the perspective of justice from "below" (i.e. the consumers' or private companies' perspective)?

In the general discussion, Felix Frey noted that unlike the Ukrainian position, the official Russian perspective sees injustice in the suffering of people from Southern Russia from power shortage and high prices, which is widely discussed in social media. Russian energy policy, which has been centralised since Soviet times, is not self-sufficient enough at regional levels. It would be interesting to analyse complaint letters, which are an important source for consumption history, in order to understand the efficiency of the grids from the bottom up perspective. Odinn Melsted made clear that it was a difficult task for Iceland to find funding for a district heating supply with an assurance that the city would generate enough revenue to pay its debts. As the archives of the institutional



framework are necessarily limited, sources as newspaper articles or diaries can reveal consumers' perspectives and individual experiences of how industries distribute energy (im)properly.

This panel offered original research topics and arose important questions. Certainly, energy justice as a fruitful concept should be considered in a broader context, especially in the case of Crimea, with particular attention to the standpoint of different groups of people within the discourse of superpowers' competition. Strikingly, the audience seemed to be more concerned with Russian high-energy prices and the Chernobyl disaster, than about democracy of energy distribution or impacts of geopolitical and economic interests on the on-going war in Ukraine, especially if we remember that Crimea's annexation happened soon after the Ukrainian discovery of shale gas in the Black Sea. If we assess the concept of energy justice from the perspective of human values, the question for further reflexions remains: can the extra costs that Russian people pay for energy after the annexation of Crimea be equal to the value of the occupied territories, destroyed infrastructure and lost lives of Ukrainians?

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Panel overview:

Josephson, Paul: Electricity For the Masses: Energy Justice for Stalin and Roosevelt

Melsted, Odinn: Distribution (In)Justices: The Case of District Heating Utilities

Frey, Felix: Disruptions. Energy Supply in Post-Annexation Crimea, 2014-2018

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